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SUBJECT: Flooding in Dakar Angers Local Population

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¶1. (SBU) Almost a week after a massive storm hit Dakar, much of the city and its low-lying suburbs remain flooded. Despite the fact that the rains and the consequent flooding is a predictable annual occurrence, the government was once again caught unprepared and is trying to blame newly-elected opposition mayors for being unable to cope with the crisis. On August 27, Prime Minister Soulayemane Ndene Ndiaye visited several of the affected areas where he announced that some USD 20 million in emergency funds would be released to assist those in need. End Summary.

Flooded Areas -----

¶2. (SBU) The worst of the flooding has been in the highly populated and sometimes volatile Dakar suburbs of Pikine, Guediawaye, Yeumbeul, Jiddah, Mbao, Thiaroye, Kaw, and Gounass where small streets and homes have been totally washed away by floodwaters. On August 25, the National Highway leading out of Dakar was so flooded that some people who live ten miles from downtown reported spending seven to ten hours on the road. There are also widespread reports of people leaving their homes because water from septic tanks and cemeteries mixed with rain water has invaded their houses. A deputy from Guediawaye quipped to Emboff, "the situation is grave, people in my area are still quiet but it may well be the calm before the storm."

¶3. (SBU) In Mbao, which was visited by two Embassy officers, 58 neighborhoods out of 76 were affected by flooding. More than 100 families are still living in stagnant waters where they cook, eat, and sleep under the ever present threat of malaria and cholera. Most people want to leave but they are too poor and have no means to pay expensive rents.

Causes -----

¶4. (SBU) While the flooding this year is spread over a wider area than last, rainfall levels have been fairly low. The August 24 storm is just the fourth major rain since July and it was just 54 millimeters. According to meteorologists, the flooded areas still have water from last year's rains because the water table is so high in the affected zones. To make matters worse new infrastructure, such as a new highway out of Dakar, crosses an area that had been set aside to collect rain water. Thus, even though firemen are equipped with huge pumps capable of pumping 700 cubic meters of water per hour, they have no place to put the water they might remove.

¶5. (SBU) The suburb of Grand Yoff, which sits in a geological depression, is a stark case in point for the adverse effects of corruption as the area now features a massive housing project initiated by members of the ruling party and their associates that stands on government land near Dakar's International Fairground and

External Trade Center. This haphazardly constructed project lacks adequate drainage and all the rain water that used to filtrate into the soil now runs directly into Grand Yoff. Meanwhile, both the mayors of Golf and Mbao told Emboffs that the lack of an urbanization strategy, emergency response and sanitation plans, and environmental canals, along with poor urban management were the main causes of the floods. They also underlined that the government had not made any effort during the past year to build pipes to drain the water.

Angry and desperate

16. (SBU) Almost all the municipal governments in the flooded areas are new and mostly from various factions of the opposition Benno Siggil Senegaal coalition. A foreshadowing of what was to come took place in April when the new municipal teams immediately complained about a chronic lack of funding, citing annual flooding as a key future challenge. In a recent trip to the affected areas the leader of the Socialist Party, Ousmane Tanor Dieng recalled the April discussions, "When our mayors took over we predicted that dealing with annual floods would be the first major test of their management. As far as I can see, the people at least feel that, unlike the government, the mayors are trying to do something for them." Both political camps are using the disaster to blame each other. The ruling party seems determined to use this crisis to show that opposition parties are incapable of solving problems, while the opposition is claiming that the government is deliberately withholding funds.

17. (SBU) The people in the flooded areas are desperate and angry as they have been forced to vacate their homes. A local city government official told Emboffs that people are being forced to live on the terraces of their homes or being given shelter by relatives. School directors, who last year sheltered some of those

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affect by flooding, are reluctant to do so again this year because last year people refused to vacate the premises until well into October. Citizens that Emboffs talked to faulted the government for not taking early emergency measures to prevent what everyone knew was coming. They underlined a lack of planning and a feeling of helplessness.

No Major Protests Yet

18. (SBU) For the time being, the situation in and around Dakar remains fairly calm. An authorized protest rally by youth associations in Mbao ended peacefully. Other peaceful rallies protesting the lack of government assistance were held in Pikine with marchers holding signs stating "we're tired of not being assisted." So far, the strongest reaction has been from the Socialist Party. In a statement, Dieng criticized President Wade for not caring about his people as he spends his vacation in luxurious accommodations in Switzerland.

Comment

19. (SBU) The ruling party thinks it has situation under control because of its having co-opted important religious leaders and opinion makers to divide a non-combative opposition. However, the situation is getting steadily worse because the flooding comes at a time when Dakar is suffering from daily power cuts. If nothing is done to help the urban poor soon, the flooding could well be the spark that starts more outspoken and vigorous political protest against a government that is still reeling from a major defeat at the polls last March.

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